

U.S. Congressional Race: District 2

Contested primaries in both parties highlights diversity of this South Jersey district

By **Tara Nurin**, May 23, 2012 in

The 2nd Congressional District is New Jersey’s largest district. It is also among the state’s most diverse, including both the state’s poorest county, Cumberland, and some of its toniest seaside resorts.

So it seems appropriate that the district is one of only three in the state in which both parties have contested primaries. Mike Assad is challenging incumbent U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo on the Republican side, while Democrats Viola Hughes, Cassandra Shoher and Gary Stein vie for their party’s nod.

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Rep. Frank LoBiondo

Covering all of Salem, Cumberland, Cape May and Atlantic counties, plus half of Gloucester County and parts of Ocean and Burlington counties, New Jersey’s southernmost district includes farming communities, shore towns, rapidly growing suburbs, the Pine Barrens and Atlantic City.

Perhaps because of its diversity, the district is also one of the state’s most politically balanced. Although it has been represented by LoBiondo for 18 years, the district can swing Democratic -- it voted for President Obama and Al Gore in two of the last three presidential elections, backing President Bush in between. “In this district you have pockets of Democrats and a very strong Republican presence,” said Ingrid Reed, former New Jersey Project Director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.



Mike Assad

For instance, Atlantic City is a traditional Democratic stronghold, as are the old chemical industry towns along the Delaware River. But other areas, particularly along the Jersey Shore, are viewed as safely Republican, perhaps because, as Reed said, “People who live in Cape May and some of the other shore towns tend to be self-made people who did it on their own. They’re small entrepreneurial types who are proud of being prosperous through their own endeavors.”

The same might be said for the conservative farmers and small townfolk who inhabit much of the rest of the district and who look to community leaders for political direction. “These people often espouse the ‘I can make it, I’m a good business man’ philosophy,” said Reed. “They tend not to relate to the more urban agenda of the Democrats.”



Viola Hughes

His constituents embrace LoBiondo, who worked for 26 years at his family’s Cumberland County trucking company. Running for re-election to his 10th term, the moderate Republican has amassed an impressive war chest to defend his seat against Assad, a 24-year old Tea Party activist and member of the Absecon school board. LoBiondo had raised \$824,894 and had almost \$700,000 on hand as of March 31, according to the Federal Election Commission. Assad, meanwhile, had raised less than \$5,000.

None of the Democrats had reports on file with the FEC. Their three-way primary includes Viola Hughes, the former mayor of Fairfield Township who lost to LoBiondo in 2006; Cassandra Shoher, a Ventnor artist and marketing manager at her husband’s law firm; and Gary Stein, the Mullica Township-based owner of an office-cleaning agency and a self-described “frequent candidate.”

Political observers say Democrats would have a chance to win the district in the fall if LoBiondo does not win his primary.



Gary Stein

“That’s the one district that would be most likely to change parties if the incumbent decided not to run. But LoBiondo is a legislator who’s pretty well regarded. The general perception is that he’s doing a good job,” said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute for Politics at Rutgers University.

“He’s got the seat as long as he wants,” agreed, David Wasserman, editor of The Cook Report House. Wasserman said Republicans may have been trying to shore up support for LoBiondo and future GOP candidates by adding a few communities in Burlington, Gloucester and Ocean counties during last year’s decennial redistricting.

State Senator Jeff Van Drew (D- Cape May Court House) is viewed as a likely and strong contender for a future run, though he’s shown no interest in trying to unseat LoBiondo.



Cassandra Shober

Whichever candidate wins election to the 113th Congress, he or she will need to take positions on some of the diverse federal issues that matter most to specific constituencies in New Jersey’s 2nd District.

Those in farming communities care about farm subsidies. In suburbanizing areas like Gloucester County’s Woolwich Township, whose population exploded by 250 percent between 1990 and 2010, environmental concerns and the battle between development and open space preservation wage on. Along the shore, beach replenishment means the difference between a profit and loss of tourism dollars. And in Atlantic City, lobbying for laws governing legalized gambling and sports betting is a high-stakes game.

Tara Nurin is a freelance journalist based on the Camden, NJ, waterfront. Since leaving a ten-year career as a TV news reporter, she’s worked as a national columnist, city editor, features reporter, publicity director and documentary producer specializing in Philadelphia-area destination coverage, travel, craft beer and dining trends. The award-winning reporter has lived all over the world and is fluent in Spanish and French.